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 SWOSUTM

The Red Mule

Thomas Dobbs

The old Chevy pickup came barreling down the gravel driveway crunching and snorting. As it rolled to a stop in front of the sagging porch of the faded white farmhouse, the driver laid on the horn until the little boy sitting in the passenger seat thought that the sputtering, coughing sound was going to die for lack of breath.

The driver, who was the boy's grandfather, rolled down the truck's window and hollered, "Hey, Okie." The man of the house, followed by a hesitant wife and flock of children, emerged through the rickety screen door.

"Hey, Roy," the farmer said warily. The man's hands were on his hips. "Been awhile." The children were lined up along the porch beside their father, the smallest on her knees with her head between the rails.

wind shifted and the other mule froze to death. The most reliable feature of Oklahoma's weather, though, is the incessant wind. If a man loses his hat, he is advised not to chase it as he can grab the next one blowing by.

The unpredictability of the weather made farming a risky business at best. Drought and flood alternated in maddening fashion. To worsen matters, the thin topsoil that covered most of Oklahoma had been used up by the excessive cotton farming or blown away in the Dust Bowl. Most of the farms that the boy saw on the trips with his muletrader grandfather were small and unprofitable. They grew alfalfa mainly, or corn to feed the cattle.

Some of the farmers still used mules to plow their fields, even in 1954. The best bottom land was controlled by big companies with modern equipment, but the family farmer in the isolated hills of eastern Oklahoma couldn't squeeze the payments for a tractor out of the land. The few fingers of fertile soil turned quickly into rocky hills, forested by equally marginal timber.

After exchanging pleasantries with the wife, Roy got right to the point. "What's your price for that red mule, John?"

Shane remembered his grandfather telling him to always ask the other man to give a price.

The suspicious farmer raised a hand off his hip to pinch his chin. "That's a mighty fine mule. I was just fixing to break him in. Barely three years old, and more spirited than a drunken sailor. Ain't never owned a mule lik'm."

Roy, his rounded belly pushing against his denim overalls, just kept smiling in the same manner he had since they drove up.

The farmer was right about the mule. It was beautiful and wild. No harness marks marred its unusual red color. Having never been shorn, its mane was so long that it had curled over to one side nearly touching its foreleg. Both the mane and the bushy tail were covered with sticky cockleburs, the tail so much so that it swung like a beehive back and forth.



Roy got out of the truck, hung his thumbs from his suspenders, and strode on over to the porch to greet the farmer with an enthusiastic handshake. Shane got out of the truck too and stood silently next to his grandfather.

The air was hot and damp, a usual summer day if such a thing existed. The weather in Oklahoma defies all prediction. Being in the exact middle of the country makes Oklahoma a transition zone for every weather known to man. Electrical storms rip the land apart by its seams and tornados sweep up the mess. The seasons overlap each other in a whirling cat fight. Many times Shane had heard stories about the weather's fickle nature.

According to one yarn, a farmer was plowing with a team of mules in summer time when one of the mules overheated and died. Before the farmer could remove the harnesses, the



Curious, the big red mule trotted over to the edge of the pasture fence and pricked up its ears so it could hear the negotiations.

The farmer nodded his head slowly, still pinching his chin. "I'd take a hundred fifty dollars."

"He's unbroken, but I'll give you forty," Roy said.

Shane, only four-years-old, listened to the haggling in amazement. In the truck on the way to the farm, his grandfather had tried to impart to the boy some of the wisdom of mule trading. "Now Shane," he had told him as though he was a grown man, "I've traded mules in this territory since I was nearly your size. At some time or other, I've took every farmer in these parts. Picked'm clean. May not remember when, but I know I have."

The boy, who had sunk deep into the mountainous bench seat of the pickup, had watched his grandfather, mesmerized. His white hair was the color of sheep after a rainless September, and a sly grin lay just underneath everything his grandfather said. Even when angry, he linked his sentences together with smiles.

"But that's to my advantage, cause I know they're trying to get even. Revenge don't pay in mule trading, son."

The two men bantered back and forth, the farmer slow and guarded, while the cagey trader became increasingly jolly and alive. Finally, the farmer looked Shane's grandfather square in the eye and said, "Roy, I'll make you a deal, but it's got to have a condition. I'll take forty dollars now, but you only got one week to get the mule out of the pasture before it belongs to me again."

With his head cocked slightly and one eye almost squeezed shut, the farmer had made the unusual proposition as a challenge.

"Sold," Roy barked loudly with a nod and simultaneous bend forward at the waist. Extracting his large leather wallet, the old muletrader paid the farmer with as much ceremony as two twenty-dollar bills could muster.

Upon receiving his money, the farmer looked up from his clenched fists and let loose a spirited yell. "Whoopee! Roy, you son of a bitch, I got you this time."

The farmer danced around the truck, rooting and hollering like a prospector who'd struck gold. When he finished his jig around the Chevy, the farmer slapped his hands on both knees and said, "Roy, three cowboys got tore all to hell trying to catch that red mule. Every time they come within ropin' distance it just high tails it into the brush. That mesquite's like razor blades. I may never catch that mule, 'cept maybe this winter, and I know you ain't gonna rope him in a week. Three ruined cowboys will tell you the same."

And then with a triumphant wink the farmer added, "But I thank you kindly for the forty dollars."

The little boy, expecting his grandfather to be angry, was surprised to see that his crocodile grin had grown even bigger.

"Go on and get in the truck, Shane," he ordered. "We'll be back after supper tomorrow, John. I ain't chasing no wild mule on an empty stomach."

As the truck backed out of the dusty drive, Roy stuck his head out the window and hollered. "Bye, Okie." Shane was sunk too low in the springy seat to be seen.

The next day, after supper, Shane followed his grandfather into the barn that sat behind the main house. Like most barns in the area, it was made of rough cut lumber, the paint long ago



weathered away. Shaped like a triangle on top of a box, the boy though it overwhelmingly large. Inside the cavernous structure, the air was filled with the thick aromas of heavy smells that were overpowering on even the coldest winter days, and now it was stifling hot. Above their heads a mountain of hay lay piled in the loft. On either side of the barn were stalls, occupied mostly with mules, although a few plow horses were mixed in.

Roy walked over to a corner of the barn, and with a huff, bent over to rummage through a heap of leather and rope lying on the straw laden dirt floor.

The old man moaned as he pushed off his knee to straighten his torso. "Take this." He handed Shane a heavy rope halter that was difficult for the boy to carry. The rope was thick, too big for the boy's fist to close around, and it was prickly. The stickery new rope felt like a thousand tiny needles being stuck into his bare arms.

Shane made a face and the old man laughed. "Green hemp halter from Mexico. H'ain't been used. Go put it in the truck."

Shane did as he was told. Tramping out of the barn with his unpleasant load, he struggled into the open air trailer which had been hitched to the old truck and gratefully dumped the rope with a thud on the plank floor. As he was climbing out of the trailer, his grandfather emerged from the barn leading Nelly, the same mare that his grandfather had used when he taught Shane how to ride.

The swayback mare clopped slowly behind the muletrader, but then stopped dead in her tracks at the back of the trailer and refused to move. Just when the boy thought that they were going to have to push the old nag into the trailer, though, she made the short jump, her stiff front legs pounding on the wood planks like two hammers.

During the whole ride to the farmer's place, Shane wondered how his grandfather was planning on roping the wild mule. If three cowboys couldn't catch that red devil, how was one old man going to do any better? Even though Shane had the utmost confidence in his grandfather, he also knew about mesquite filled thickets. If the steel-like web of branches didn't get you, the chiggers and snakes would. Countless times his grandfather had warned him not to go into the mesquite underbrush, and Shane had been tempted to disobey him.

The most confusing part, though, was why his grandfather had chosen Nelly as a mount. Even on their best stallion, the old man didn't stand much chance of roping the red mule. Once into the tangled cover of mesquite, Nelly and his grandfather would be no match for the unmounted beast which had the extra advantage of being half donkey.

"Papa," Shane said in a worried voice, "shouldn't we bring Buck along to help us catch the mule?"

Buck was the boy's uncle. Though grown, he still lived at home. A huge, strapping man, Buck played games with Shane for hours and hours, and the boy loved him.

"Naw. No need to go and rile Buck over just one mule. You can help me."

The boy's face crinkled with worry. He couldn't possibly see how he was going to be much help. The red mule had looked very wild.

This time, when they drove down the farmer's driveway his grandfather didn't honk the horn. Instead, he eased the rig on up to the pasture gate and turned to the boy. "Go on and open the gate, Shane."

Shane climbed down from the truck. The three-board fence rose well over his head, but the latch was the same kind they had on their fence at home. Shane pulled the bolt out of the ground, and lifting the edge of the sagging boards up off the gravel with all his strength, he slowly swung the gate aside with heavy steps. His grandfather eased the truck through the gate, then drove the rig in a big half circle until the front of the truck was once again facing the fence, and the back of the trailer opened up to the pasture.

The red mule watched the entire proceedings, but having associated trailers with cowboys long ago, it moved away from the farmhouse and positioned itself within a short gallop of the mesquite. Shane stared at the mule with admiration. Unlike the plow mules he was accustomed to seeing, this mule was as wild and proud as an unbroken racehorse. Its head rose high into the air, and its erect ears were pricked to rigid points. He sensed an intelligence in the red mule that he didn't sense in Buck's razorbacks, or in the goats his grandfather kept to keep down the grass that the rattle snakes liked to hide in, or even in their hound dogs. A mule like that wasn't going to be easily roped.

The farmer, who had been working in his barn when their truck arrived, walked over to the fence and leaned against a rail. He was chewing on a piece of straw and trying, without success, to hide his amusement.



"Hey, Okie," the farmer called out with a smug nod of his head. Then he looked around, perplexed. "Where are your cowboys, Roy?"

"Only brought one," the muletrader replied, his face unreadable behind the crocodile grin. "Shane. He'll do the ropin'."

The farmer's look of disbelief was almost as big as Shane's. Just shaking his head, the farmer settled against the fence, eagerly awaiting the spectacle of Roy Smart finally making a fool of himself.

"Shane, let down the back of the trailer."

Nervous and a little scared, Shane unlatched the trailer gate, lowering it to the ground. Nelly stood motionless and disinterested, except for her tail half-heartedly switching flies. Her head was buried in a bag of oats, while her rump faced directly out into the pasture in the direction of the red mule. Shane waited for his grandfather to give him another instruction, but the old man just stood next to the fence, waiting.

The mule, which had been watching the trailer intently from his position of safety, whinnied curiously. After a moment of undecided hesitation, the mule began to slowly walk toward the trailer, its ears pointed forward and its nose close to the ground, like a hound dog locked onto a scent.

The mule came closer and closer.

Shane made a move away from the trailer but his grandfather stopped him with an outstretched hand. Shane watched in amazement as the wild mule with the long unshorn mane hopped up into the trailer, whinnied loudly, then real friendly-like leaned into Nelly. The mule kept shoving its head into Nelly's until their heads, bobbing in and out of each other, resembled two snakes jockeying for position.

"I've seen a mule hop a six-foot fence to get to a mare in heat," Roy said. "It's a shame their gun's got no bullets."

The farmer looked devastated. His jaw dropped to his chest, the piece of straw dangling from his lower lip.

Roy reached down from the tailgate and latched it back in place. "Shane, get that rope halter out'a the back of the truck and put it on the mule."

Shane retrieved the stickery halter, but then stood helplessly next to the truck. His grandfather walked over, and picking the boy up, held him above the front wall of the trailer. The mule was still nuzzling Nelly, who had gone back to eating out of her bag of oats. Shane easily slipped the halter over the

